# A CONDUCTOR'S GUIDE TO THE EDUARD TUBIN BASS CONCERTO

A CREATIVE PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

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FOR THE DEGREE

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Concertos are infamously some of the most difficult and treacherous pieces to conduct. This is for more reasons than one. Conductors have to consider many things when attempting to effectively represent the orchestra, while also aiming to tastefully partner with a soloist. Firstly, we must consider the obvious details associated with all music. These include tempo, balance, articulation, phrasing, and tone (vibrato, color), as well as the attention to accuracy expected from all conductors. Then, we must consider the problems that concertos present. We must think about the basic details in a different way, because they are all relative to the soloist, and then we must analyze and troubleshoot the score in a way that is conducive to quick and productive rehearsals. The analysis and rehearsal preparation of the score, when considering the soloist, must both include proactivity. This proactivity will allow for the best rehearsals, and an effective performance. The conductor, and by proxy the orchestra, must be concerned with ensemble (the way the orchestra plays together).

David Itkin mentions in his book about conducting concertos: "...the difference between becoming the conductor who is esteemed and appreciated by his soloist colleagues and one who is merely tolerated or even dismissed has a great deal to do with the technical, analytical, intellectual, and intra-personal skills in this book."[1] He goes on to discuss some techniques that will help/hurt conductors, as well as what soloists will want. Itkin discusses that the ways in which a conductor navigates concertos can build and burn bridges in an evening.[2]

In his book, he mentions the importance of having the technical ability to convey all of the necessary information in the pieces. If the conductor is unable to communicate all of the

[1] David Itkin, *Conducting Concerti: A Technical and Interpretive Guide*, (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2014), 8
[2] Ibid.,11-13

necessary information, they will not be successful in their attempt to lead an orchestra in the concerto genre.

> Projecting this level of technical and intellectual expertise and inspiring the resulting trust, ease, and freedom in both the soloist and the musicians of the orchestra are the ultimate goals of the conductor in the concerto setting. Having accomplished this, the conductor has set the stage for a performance that is not only technically excellent but also a joyous and inspiring experience for both the audience and his musician collaborators.[3]

In a concerto, ensemble includes all the details mentioned above, but in a more complicated context. This situation requires sensitivity that will support and strengthen the soloist. The *Tubin Bass Concerto*, as well as many other concertos written for double bass, presents these issues in an even more complicated way. Because the double bass has a difficult time projecting in a large concert hall, all of the aforementioned concepts are even more problematic. As well, in Tubin's concerto, there is even greater difficulty because the orchestra is so massive. In other bass concertos the size of the orchestra is much smaller. In some cases, the orchestra is as small as a string section alone. The Tubin features a full romantic orchestra, complete will full winds, full brass, and percussion. The size of the orchestra exacerbates all ensemble issues. In this paper, I will discuss issues regarding the issues mentioned above: tempo, balance, articulation, phrasing, and tone.

Eduard Tubin was an Estonian composer who was active during the middle of the twentieth century. His music was celebrated during his life in Estonia, and also in Sweden. He

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[3] Ibid., 4

moved to Sweden after the USSR occupied Estonia in 1944. He was born in 1905 to a family of peasants, and died in 1982 after a long career. He is regarded as a fine symphonist.[4]

When a conductor and a concerto soloist begin work on a piece together, they must decide an appropriate tempo. The appropriate tempo largely focuses on the needs of the soloist, but should also be a tempo in which the orchestra can succeed. David Itkin mentions that there is sometimes a social compromise that must occur. For example: if the soloist is a student, like a concerto competition winner, then the conductor will perhaps have an opportunity to teach. If the soloist is older and more experienced, or has accumulated such clout that their opinion demands respect, the conductor will have to finagle their way into a compromise, or simply take what the soloist says as law. This applies to more than just tempo.

The Tubin is marked at 152-160 BPM to the quarter-note. Sometimes, composers mark a tempo that is undoable for the orchestra or player, but that is not the case here. The marked tempo is very appropriate for the written music. The first moment where the conductor must be aware of a tempo change is in measure 32. Here the composer writes a *molto meno mosso.* He also provides an empty beat before the marked tempo change so that the conductor can give a preparatory beat that is in the tempo of the next bar. Since the composer does this, this tempo change is not terribly difficult to navigate. This section is followed by a recitative. See figure 1.[5]

The second big change to occur comes at measure 87. Here the conductor will be conducting in a two pattern. The conductor can use the bar before to prepare the ensemble for the tempo change, perhaps taking a small *ritardando* before measure 87. This transition is not a

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[4] Arved Ashby, “Tubin, Eduard,” Grove Music Online, https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.28538

[5] Large score excerpts are located at the end of the prose text beginning on page 12. Smaller figures are included within the text.

terribly treacherous one, because there are so few instruments playing, and it is a calm moment in the piece. See figure 2. At measure 112 the conductor should make sure to keep their ear on the soloist's eighth notes. The conductor will need to perform every gesture in an anticipatory fashion, because often in an orchestra, the winds will speak late. In a concerto, this occurs with greater severity. In a bass concerto, the problem intensifies. This occurs because often the wind players can hardly hear the soloist, and what they are happens about two seconds later. The sound first travels to the hall, and then back to the players.

The next tempo change comes at measure 205. This tempo change comes at a tutti arrival point. The difficult part about navigating this transition has to do with the number of instruments and the intensity of the moment. The conductor must go from a faster tempo, even though the pulse is slower, to a slower tempo, with a faster pulse. Starting in measure 103, the conductor should transition from a two pattern into a four pattern, perhaps only conducting the last half of measure 204 in four. The conductor can use these two bars to prepare the tempo change, broadening into the downbeat of measure 205. This will allow the players to settle in to the new tempo comfortably. See figure 3.

As we approach measure 249, we must slow down. The allargando in bar 244 allows the conductor to begin to slow down to reach the slow tempo at 249. In the section that begins at bar 249, the conductor needs to be prepared to be flexible. The soloist may want to take time throughout their espressivo melody, and the conductor must be able to follow their lead. In measure 287, the orchestra should be ready to take a brisker tempo, which is indicated by the energico marking in the solo part. The tempo settles at 307. From here until the cadenza the tempo should remain the same. See figure 4.

Coming out of the cadenza is perhaps the section of greatest difficulty, in terms of tempo. This section will need much rehearsal, so that the clarinet players can coordinate with the soloist properly. It will need rehearsal because of the distance between the instruments, as well as the difference between their respective attacks. See figure 5. From here until the end of the piece, the tempo largely remains the same. There is a *molto sostenuto* in bar 517, which I advise to do in four, and there is an *accelerando* for the last five bars. These are fairly straight forward.

The biggest tempo issue with a piece like this isn't necessarily that there is a copious amount of changes, as much as that the pulse tends to fluctuate throughout the orchestra. Sometimes players will be rushing and dragging in different parts of the orchestra at the same time. This occurs even more in a bass concerto, because the acoustics of the instrument play tricks on the orchestra's ears. The conductor must be ready to remedy this with a focused pattern and an unwavering steadiness.

Another issue that a conductor must be aware of when it comes to conducting a bass concerto is balance. Often in concertos, the orchestra struggles to play under the performer. At the risk of sounding repetitive, this problem is magnified when dealing with a bass soloist. The double bass is a naturally muffled and quiet instrument. Its *tessitura*, or playable range, is considerably lower than every other instrument in the orchestra, except for the contrabassoon or the tuba. Because of this, the other instrument sections have a much easier time projecting. Musicians throughout history have dismissed the double bass' ability to play any sort of melodic line. Sometimes quite humorously.[6] However, specific composers, usually bassists, have written bass concertos and solo pieces that have been very effective. Usually, the orchestra for a bass

[6] Hector Berlioz, "Treatise on Instrumentation and Orchestration," trans. Michael Austin, http://www.hberlioz.com/Scores/BerliozTreatise.html

concerto is smaller in size. For example, Bottesini's second concerto is written for only a string orchestra. Many of the other concertos are classical in style, such as the Vanhal or Capuzzi. These would be played with a much smaller orchestra, perhaps even a chamber orchestra.

This concerto employs a large orchestra, and due to that, measures must be taken in order for the soloist to be heard at all times. For some conductors, this means cutting down on the number of string players or telling the orchestra to play *mezzo forte* or quieter for the entire piece. In other situations the bassist may elect to use an amplification set-up that increases the volume produced by the individual. The bassist may choose to use a pick-up or a microphone to get their desired sound. Often, amplification will be the desired solution. This allows everyone in the orchestra to play with their full, healthy sound, while also featuring the soloist.

Generally speaking, Tubin does a good job of keeping the orchestra out of the way when the soloist needs to be heard. Still, there are a few places in the piece where the conductor should be aware of what is happening in terms of balance. While the soloist is playing, if the orchestra has a *crescendo*, a *piu forte*, or any dynamic above *mezzo piano*, they should try to play less than what they have printed as a rule. As well, if they have a *crescendo* with the soloist, they should tend to let the soloist lead the *crescendo* and save the bulk of their growth until the end of the *crescendo*. The first place this is a significant issue is in measure 123. See figure 6. Here, with the string tremolos and the sustained notes in the woodwinds, it could be easy for the bassist to be washed out. Make sure that the strings truly play a quiet dynamic and this section should be fine. As well, the woodwinds should only take their crescendos to a *mezzo piano* or quieter. Continuing in this section, players will want to *crescendo* as more players come in. The conductor must be sure to insist on a quieter dynamic so that the bassist can be prevalent.

The next section where balance may be an issue is in the slow middle section. Starting in measure 287, and moving forward until the cadenza, the orchestra adds instruments in and crescendos, but they should never crescendo to the point where the soloist is overwhelmed by the sound of the orchestra. Particularly, when the double basses and cello are playing the counter melody starting in bar 302, the soloist can begin to get lost.

In bar 459 it is possible that the swell of the orchestra will cover up the soloist. The trombones should come in with a piano dynamic and everyone else should only crescendo to about mezzo piano. At bar 477, the low strings have a poco crescendo printed. Here I would advise the violas and basses to not crescendo at all, because the crescendo will be felt in the soloist and in the winds. See figure 7. In the twelve bars before measure 517, as mentioned before, the orchestra should save most of the crescendo until just before the down beat of 517.

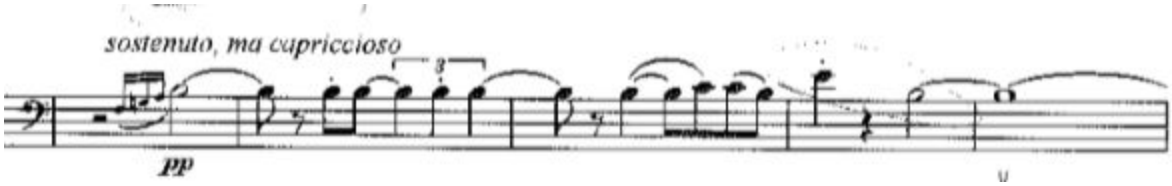
At bar 548, the violins have divisi octaves. Here is a place that the conductor might ask only the front few stands of players to play. This is because the violins play in a much higher register than the bass, so they will project with much more ease. As well, the flutes should avoid playing too loudly here, because they also play in a much higher tessitura. See figure 8.

In terms of articulation there are several places in the piece where the players need to emulate the articulation that the bassist chooses to apply. This will mean different things for different instruments. For example, if the trumpets have the same thing as the double bass solo, they may need to exaggerate the articulation. Obviously, this principle needs to be considered throughout, but there are specific spots where the attention to articulation can really make the piece better.

The first spot where specificity of articulation could be focused on is bar 103. Here the

bass introduces a theme that features the repetition of one note. When a pitch is repeated, the other parameters of the note are often intensified, such as dynamic and articulation. Often, the rhythm is also meant to be intensified. This pitch is repeated on a very specific rhythm as well. Here the articulation will likely be rhythmic and clear.

Figure 2a.*Tubin Bass Concerto*. mm 103-107.




Later in bar 149, the oboe, flute, and piccolo trade this motif around. It is important to note that when the orchestral players have the melody, it will likely be more rhythmic and marcato than when the bass soloist has it. The conductor and players should take great effort to ensure that the orchestral players are using the same articulations as the bassist. Later in the piece, the oboe and trumpet have it together, so the matching of articulations and lengths is even more important.

The next location is at measure 287. Here the soloist has a march-like melody that is characterised by the dotted eighth note to sixteenth note rhythm. Players have a tendency to want to play the sixteenth a little "crushed," or closer to the next eighth note than what is exactly printed. If the player decides to do this, it is up to the conductor to determine whether or not this style should be continued when the low strings and bassoon have this figure six bars later. As well, even if the soloist does not want to "crush" the sixteenth note, the conductor should take great care to make sure that this figure does not turn into triplets.

Figure 10. *Tubin Bass Concerto*. mm 287-288.


From the cadenza to the end of the piece, the conductor needs to make sure that the orchestra is using the appropriate amount of lift in the quarter notes of the melody. In measure 328, the clarinets introduce the melody that will dominate the remainder of the piece. The quarter note on the down beat of this measure needs to be played almost like an eighth note followed by an eighth note rest. This will allow the melody, which again is characterized by a repeated pitch, to have the energy it needs to keep moving.

The phrasing will need to be treated similarly to the way that the articulation is treated. If in specific instances, the soloist decides to do something artistic with the phrase, then the orchestra needs to be prepared to either follow, or answer the choices of the soloist. In this section, I will discuss how to navigate the soloist's cadenza or recitative moments.

The first section where the soloist has a recitative-like moment is in measure 38. To prepare for this moment, the conductor should have their baton down for most of the bar before, then, depending on the soloist, during the last 5-7 sixteenths of the run, the conductor should raise their baton, preparing to give a clear downbeat for the attack going into beat two of the next bar. In bar 39, the conductor should give a preparatory beat for the next bar, in the tempo of the next bar. See figure 1.

The next difficult section to navigate comes as the soloist is exiting the cadenza. The conductor should begin to conduct in measure 321. See figure 5. It is imperative that the conductor is clear with the orchestra about where he/she is beginning to conduct, as counting rests coming out of this cadenza could prove to be tricky for the players. As well, it is important to give the clarinets a very clear tempo as they enter. They need as much clarity as possible, because their instrument needs to speak on time, and in that register of the clarinet, the beginning of the note is sometimes late. This is the biggest "conductor trap" in the piece.

There is one more moment where the conductor needs to be aware of a fermata in the double bass solo. This is in the bar before the coda, or bar 578. This bar is deceptively difficult to time between the bassist and the conductor, because the bassist's part is arrhythmic. Working around this problem is done when the conductor and the soloist decide how they together are going to navigate here. They will find an appropriate amount of time for the *glissando* to last. The preparatory beat should be in the tempo of the next bar. See figure 9.

The concept of orchestral tone in a bass concerto is different from the concept of orchestral tone of a piano or violin concerto. Often, like Tubin has, composers will compensate for the dark tone of the bass by using more muted, sometimes literally, tones in the orchestra. For example, when the bass soloist first enters, the accompaniment is clarinets and low strings. The composer is considerate of tone throughout. Therefore, the conductor is not required to labor as much as would otherwise be necessary.

Given the specific passages mentioned, and given the solutions I have provided, the conductor, orchestra, and soloist will be able to achieve success with much more ease. This advice will give the conductor the tools they need in order to lead the ensemble through the

*Tubin Bass Concerto* with elegance and control. Greater success will be had in terms of balance, articulation, and phrasing.

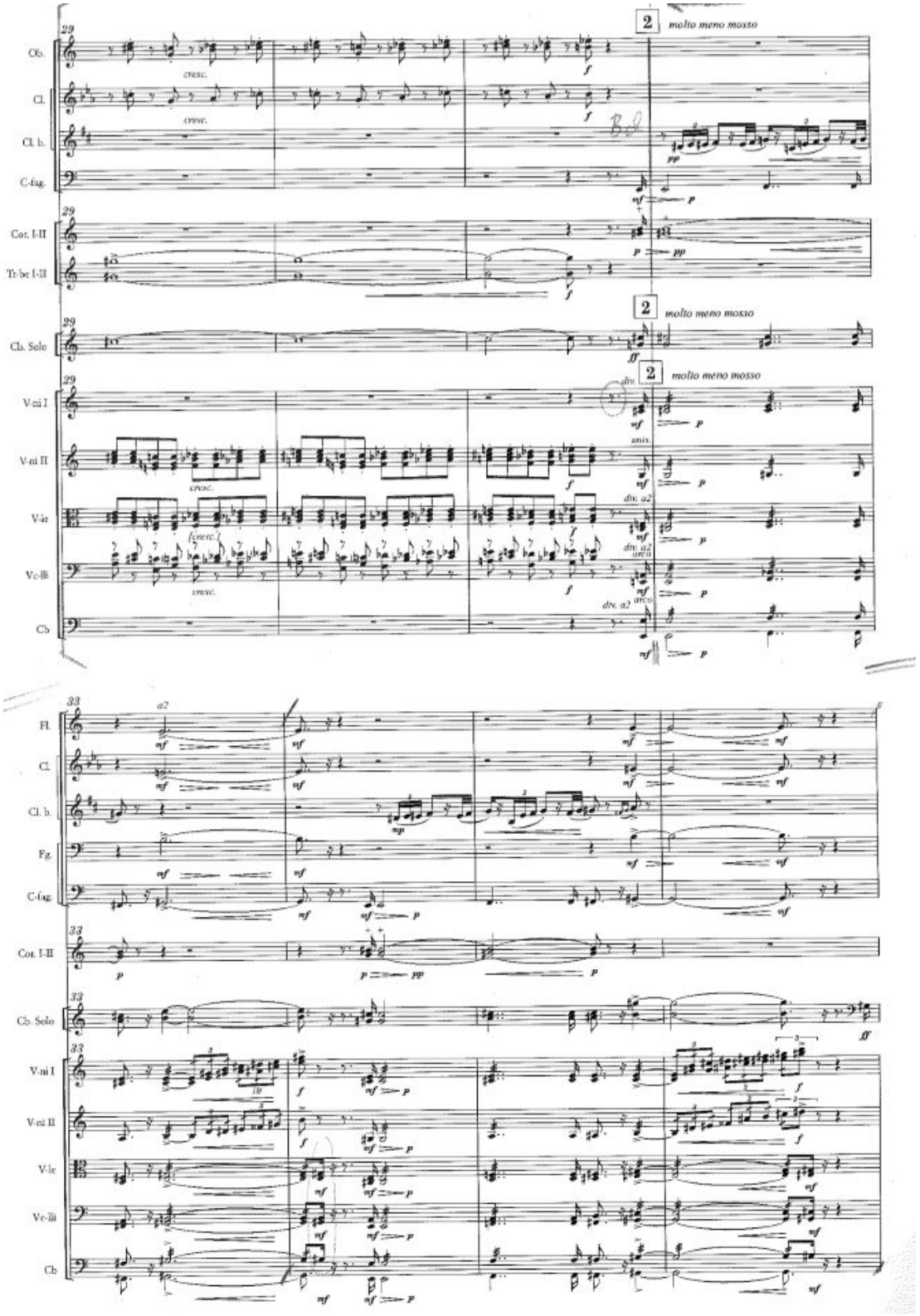



Figure 1. *Tubin Bass Concerto* mm. 29-40. (1)

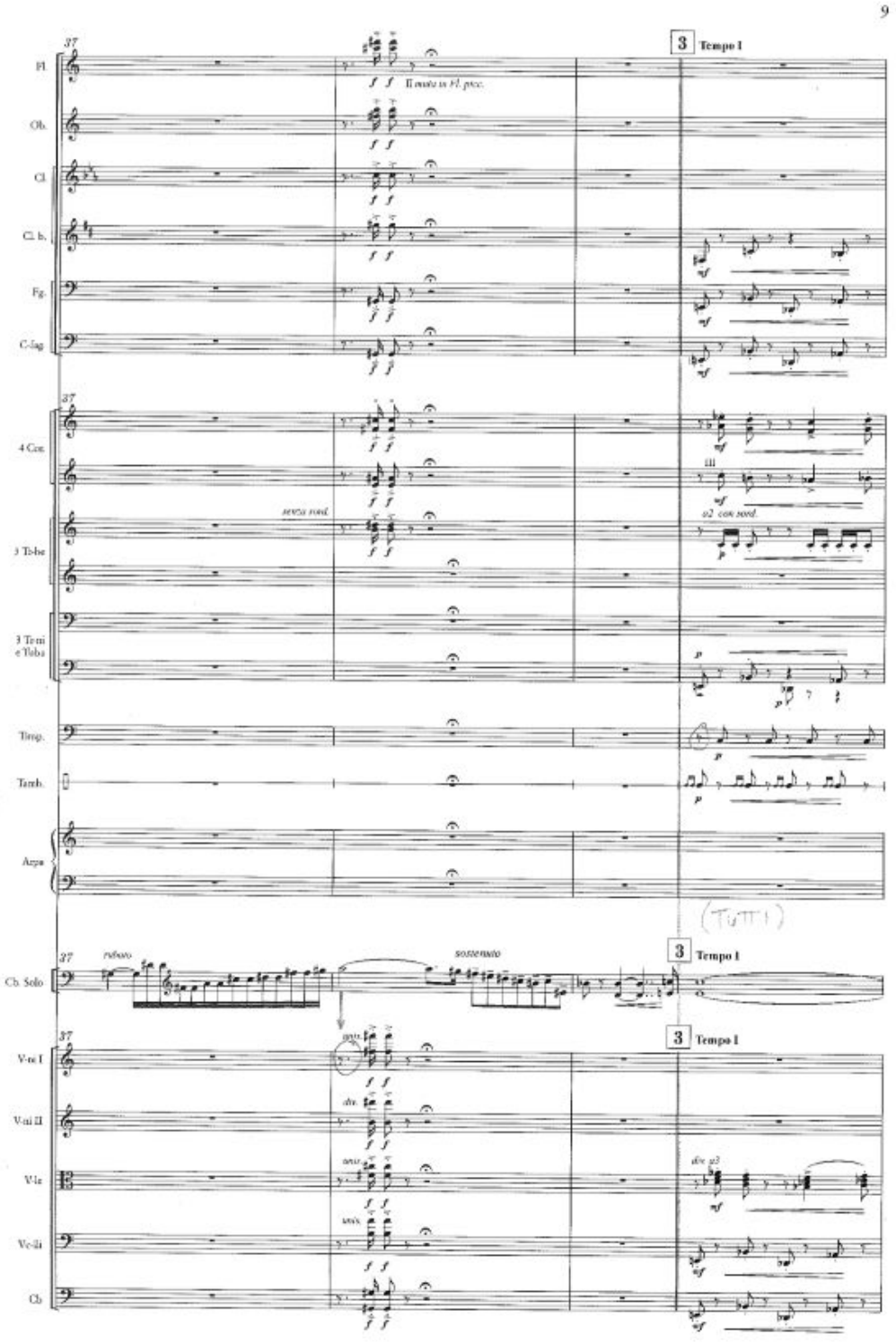



Figure 1. *Tubin Bass Concerto* mm. 29-40. (2)

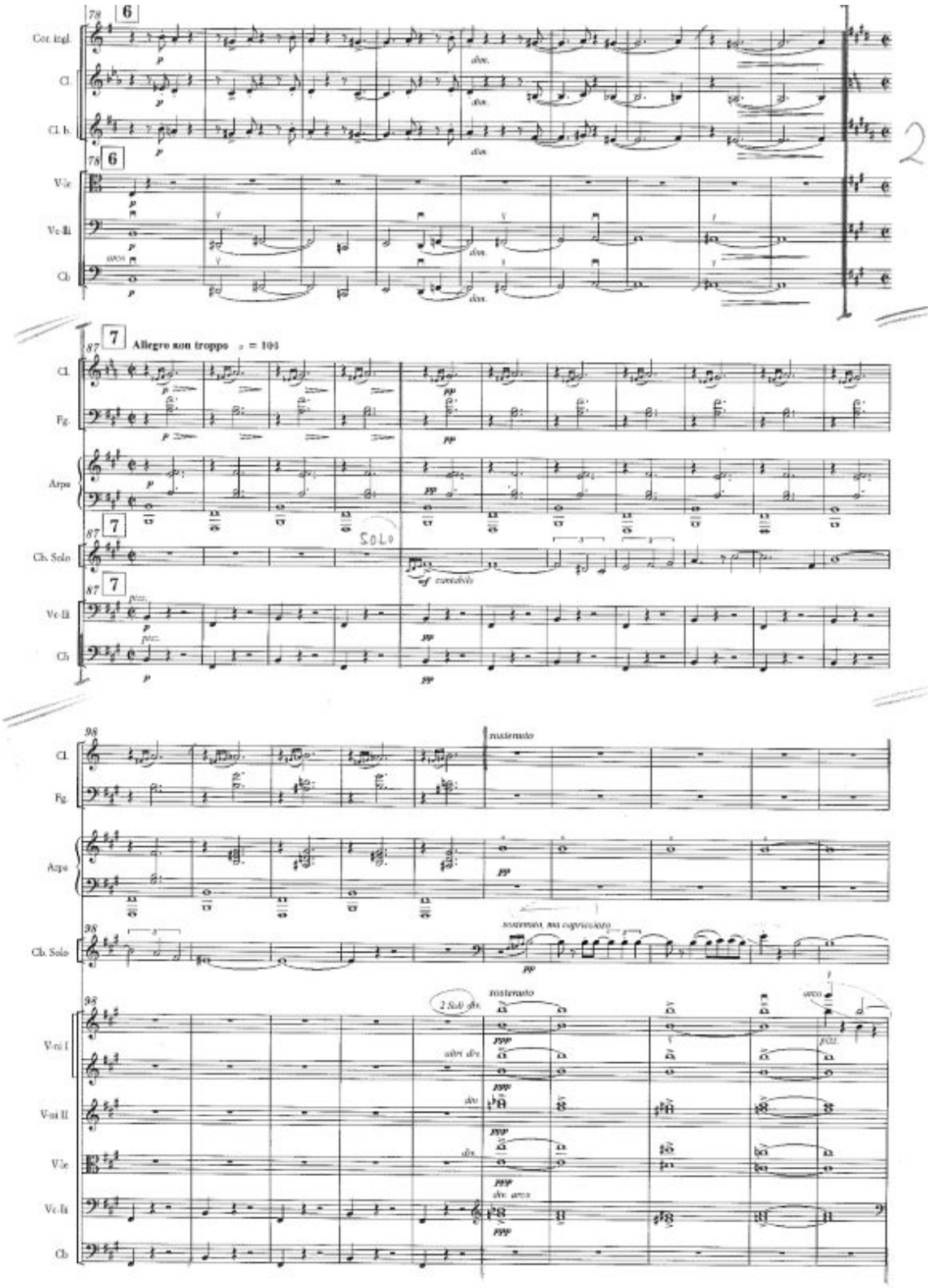



Figure 2. *Tubin Bass Concerto* mm. 78-107.

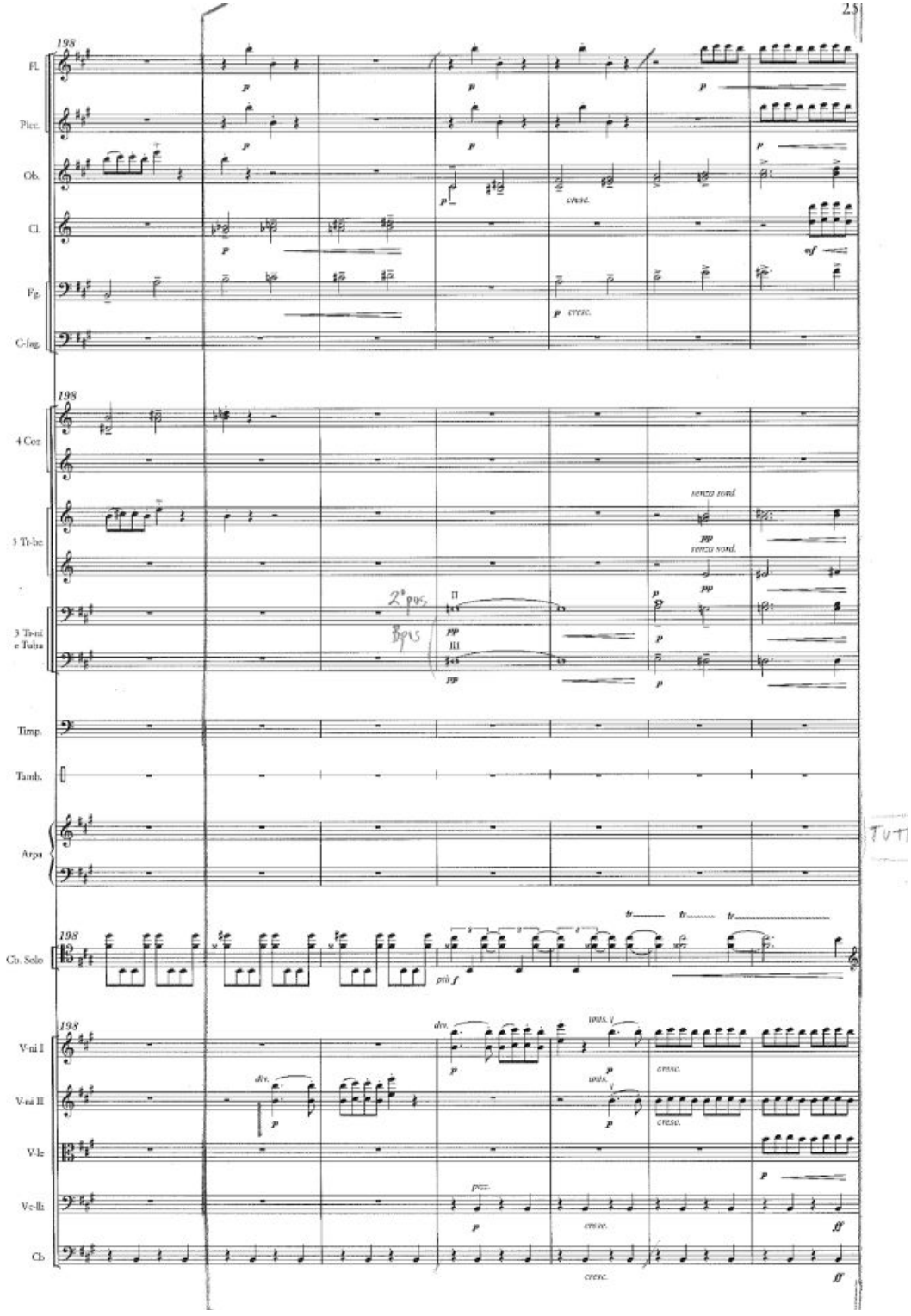
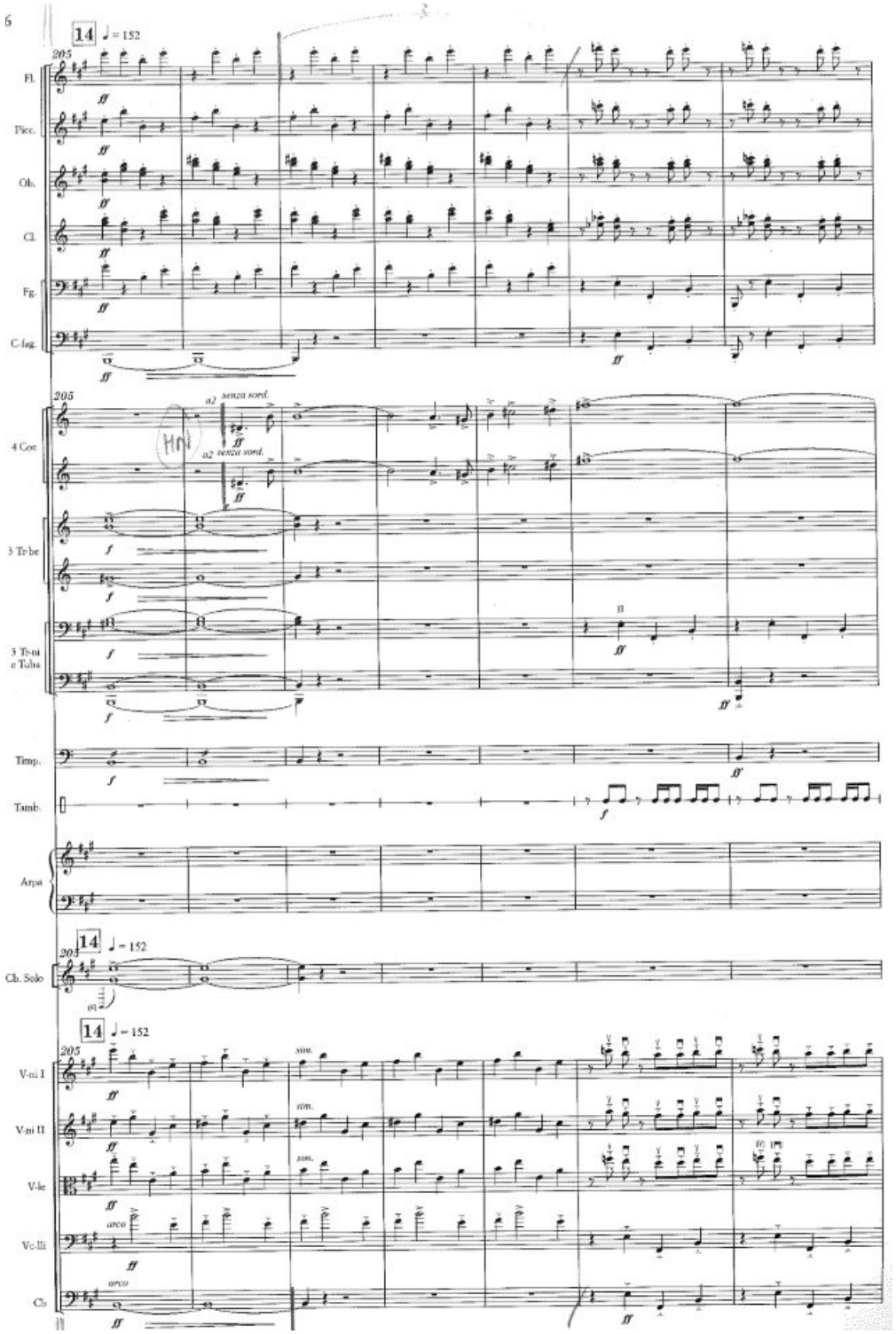



Figure 3. *Tubin Bass Concerto* mm. 198-211 (1)

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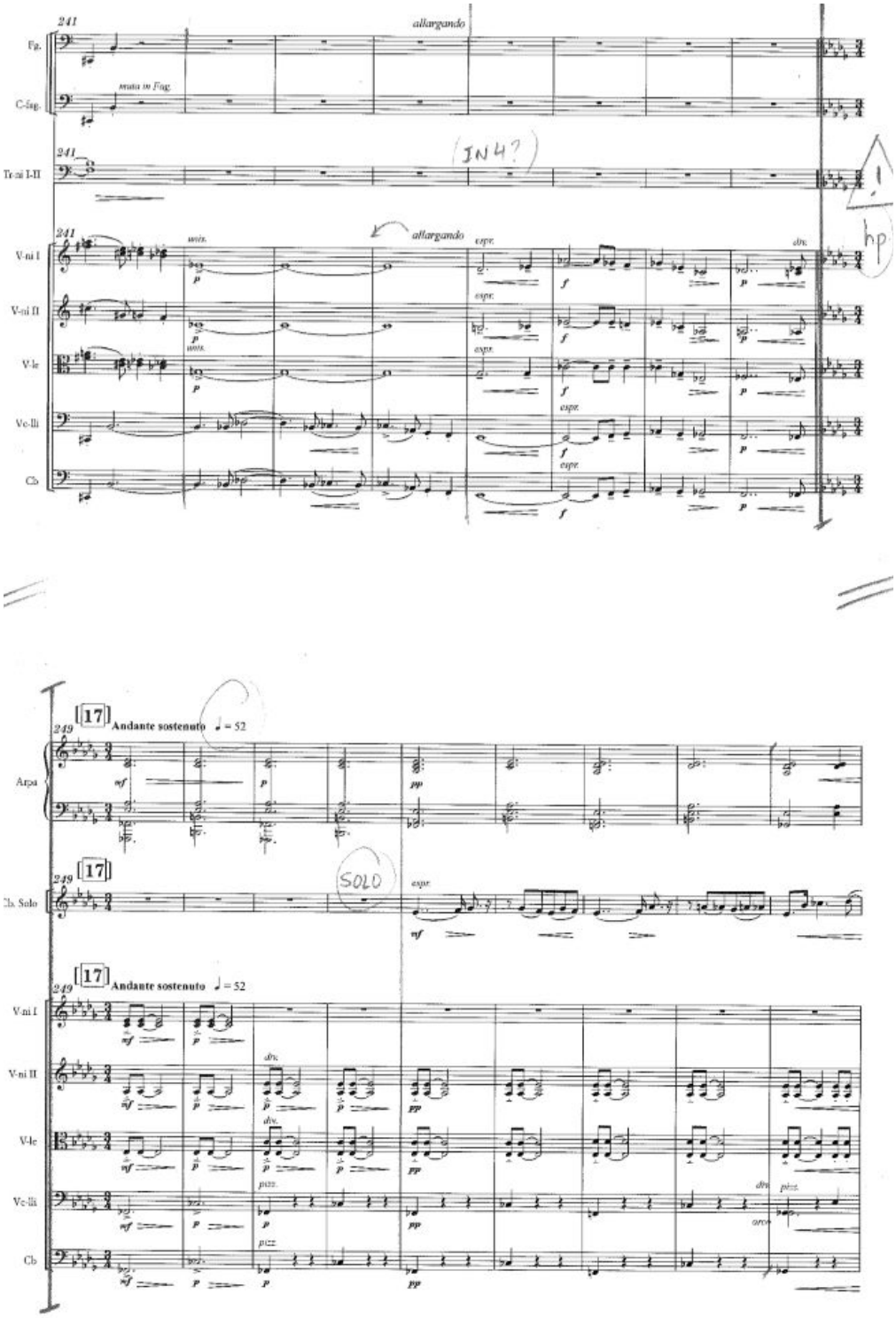


Figure 4. *Tubin Bass Concerto* mm. 241-257.

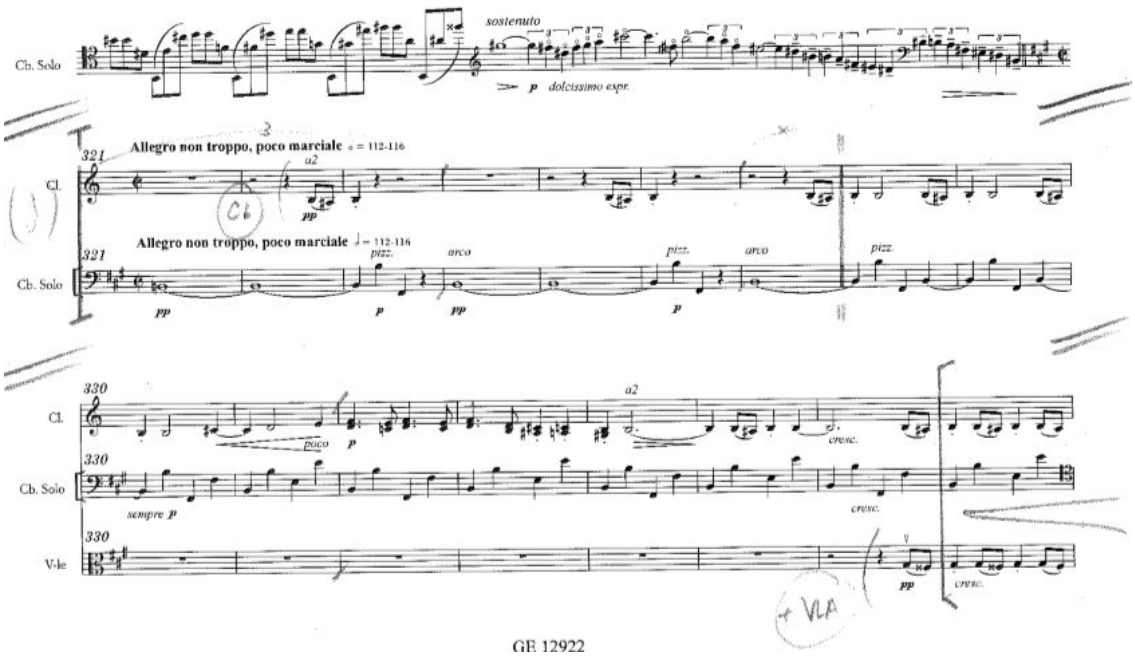


Figure 5. *Tubin Bass Concerto* mm. 320-337

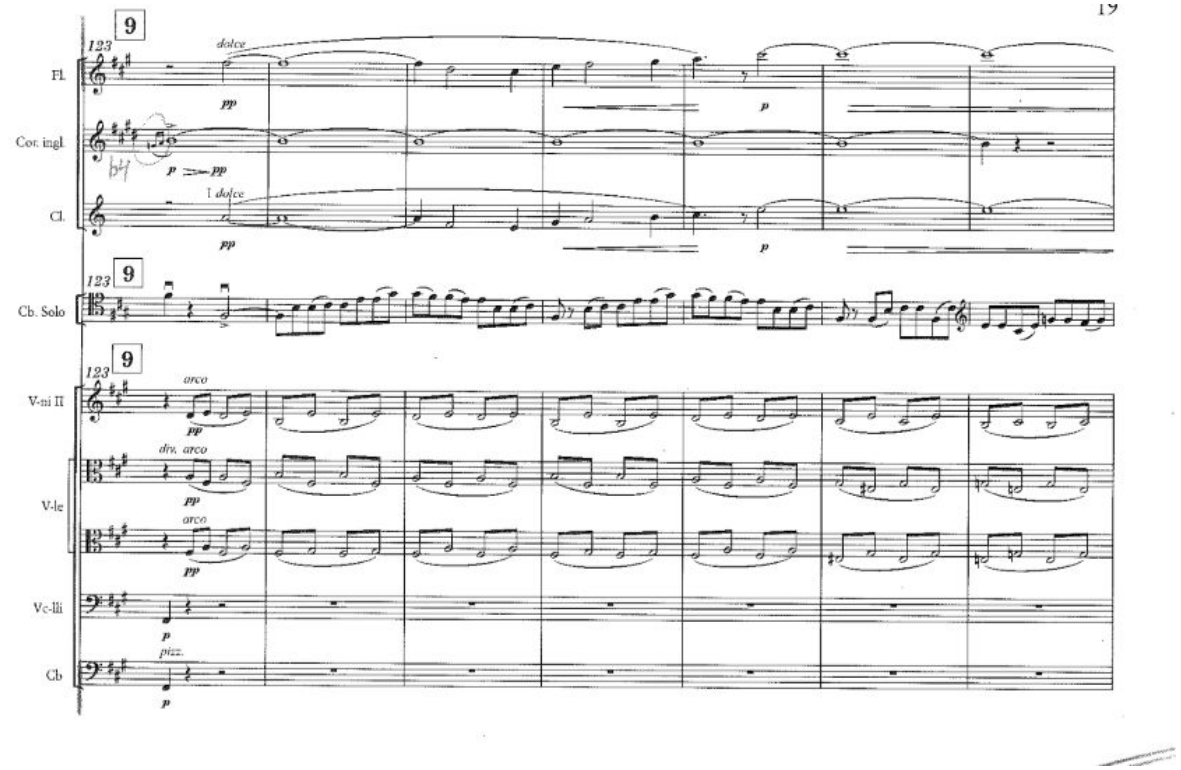


Figure 6. *Tubin Bass Concerto* mm. 123-129.

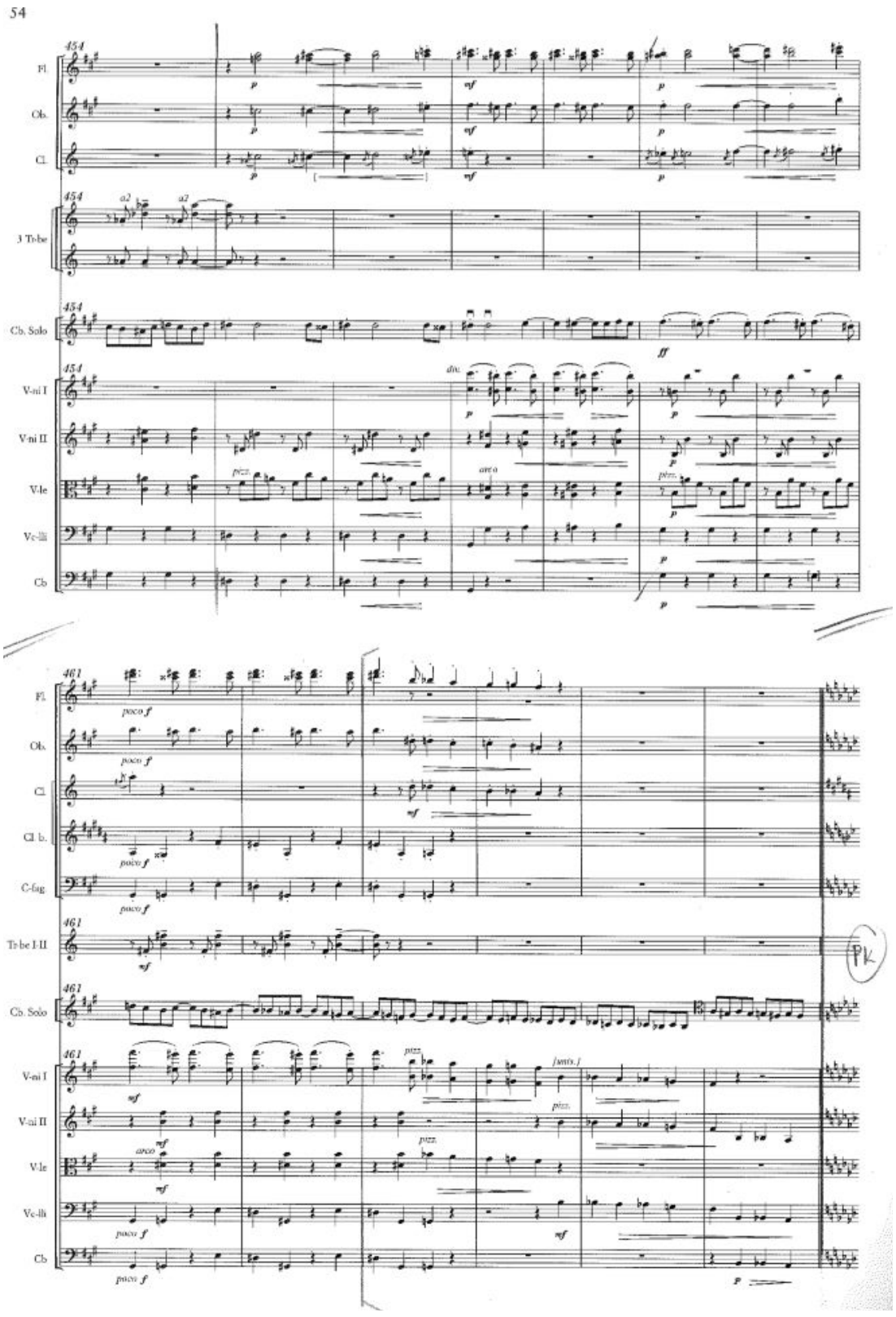


Figure 7. *Tubin Bass Concerto* mm. 154-166

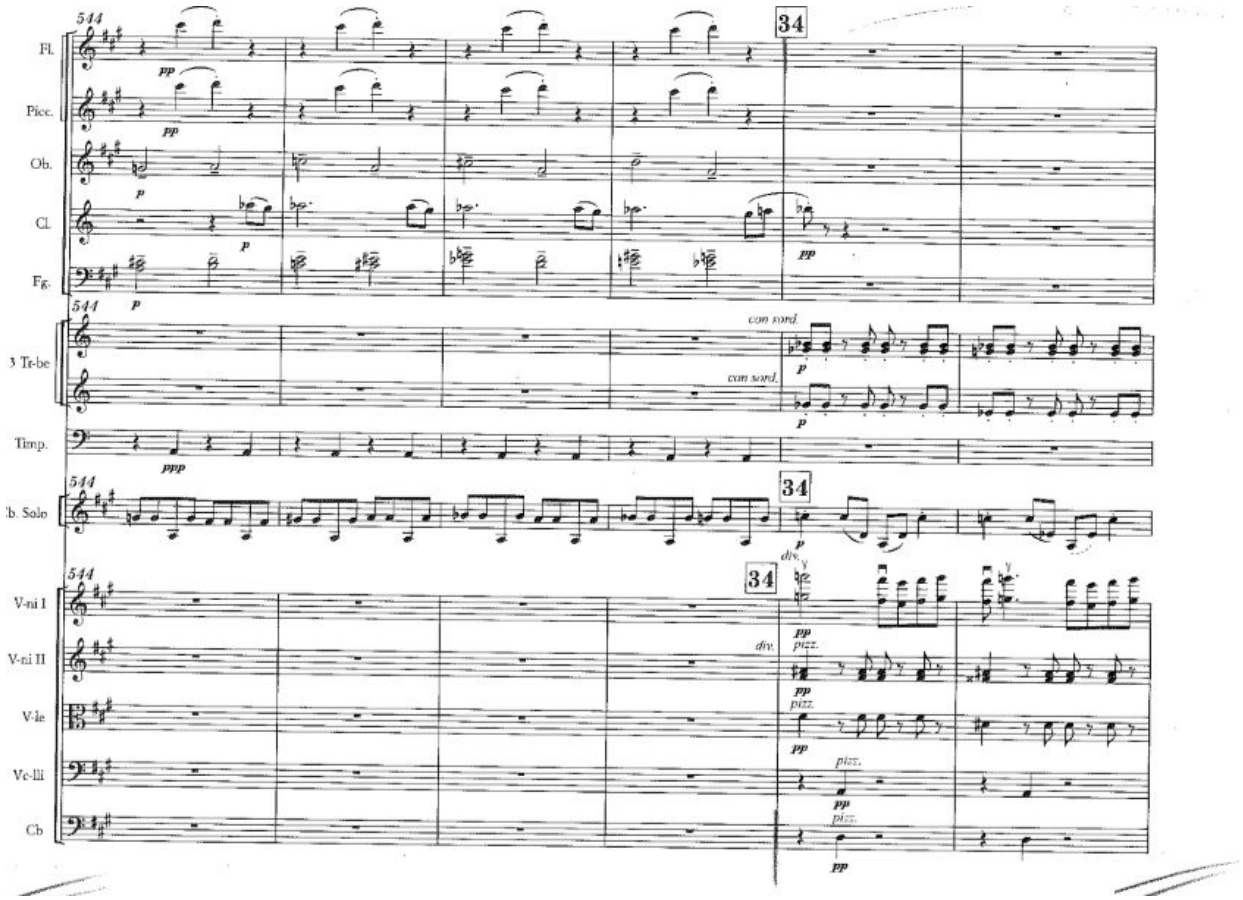


Figure 8. *Tubin Bass Concerto* mm. 544-549

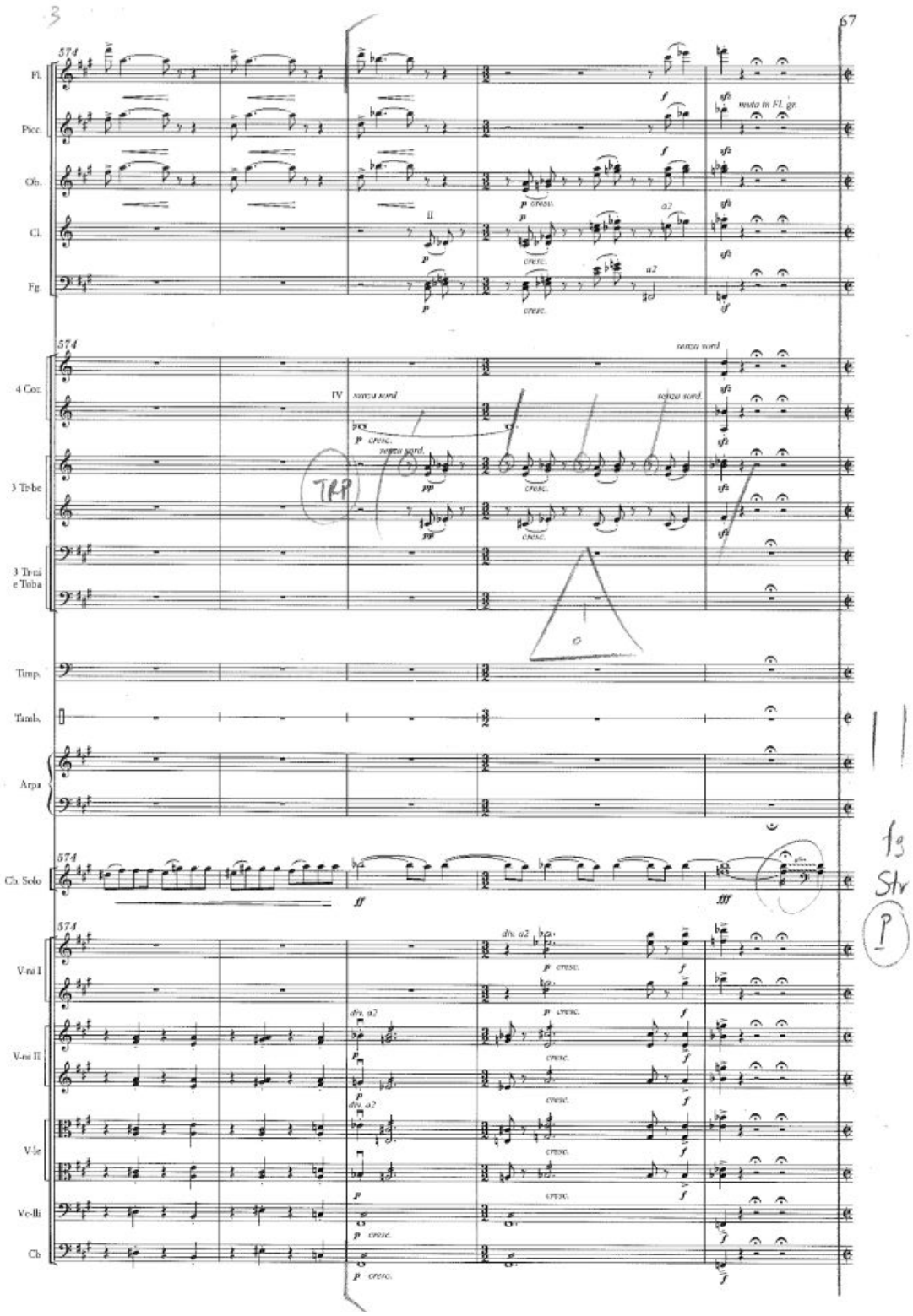


Figure 9. *Tubin Bass Concerto* mm. 574-585 (1)

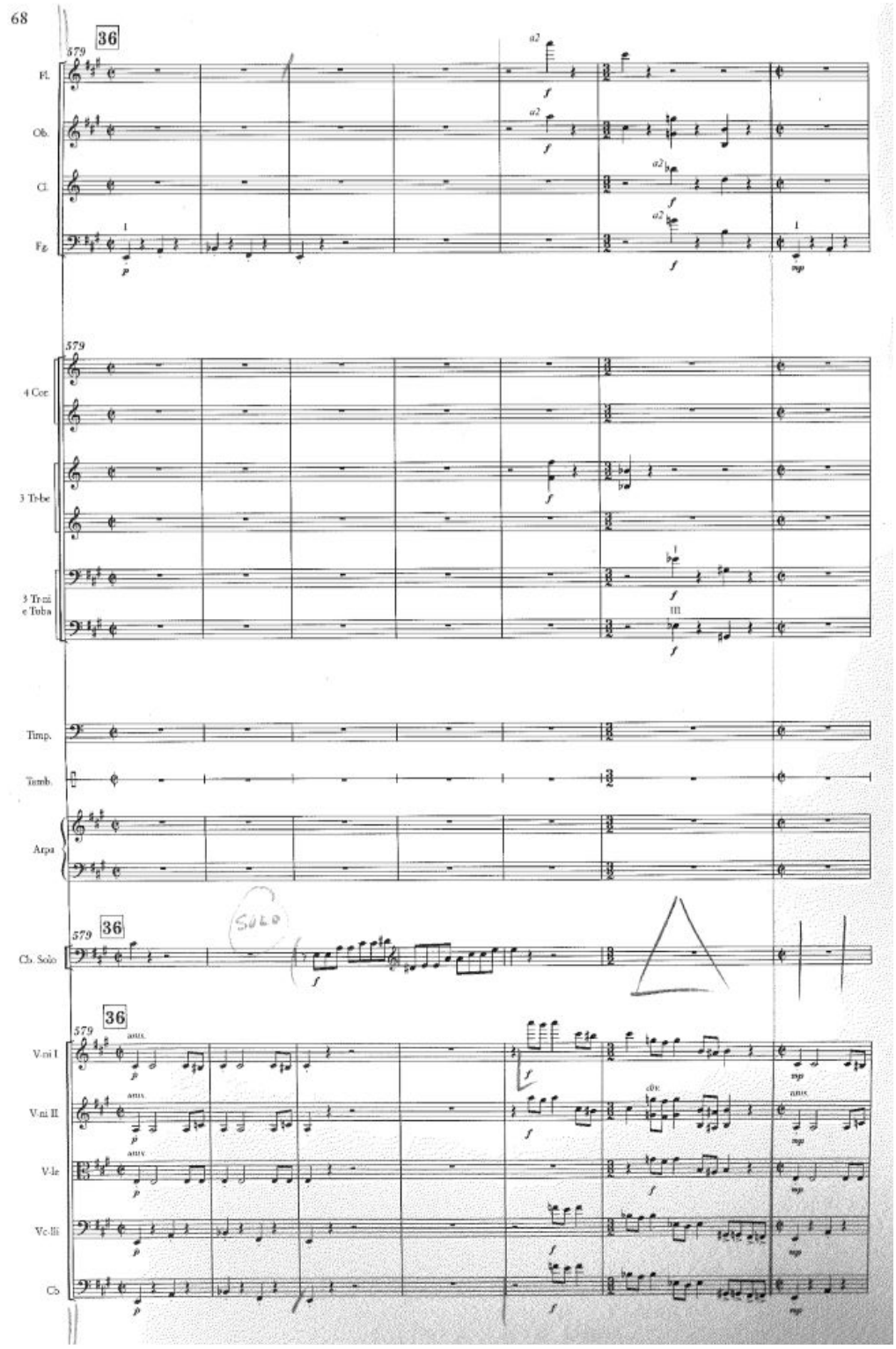


Figure 9. *Tubin Bass Concerto* mm. 574-585 (2)

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